**Taking Your Measure -** accountability  
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As the elementary school counseling project leader for the Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency in Iowa, Cindy Swanson’s situation is unique. She’s part of a state-funded agency whose mission is to help schools align themselves with new state and federal practices. And what’s high on the recent agenda? Being accountable for services provided.

“The system’s not satisfied anymore with just numbers,” Swanson said. “It used to be, ‘How many kids did you see this year?’ But the numbers didn’t stand for anything. Now we have to show accountability, how behaviors have changed.”

With increasing pressure from area principals, superintendents and school boards to show accountability, Swanson knew it was time to prove they were making a difference. “We didn’t have anything to justify our counseling services,” Swanson said.

The solution came in the form of a million-dollar grant Swanson received to further develop elementary school counseling programs and enhance the learning environment. A grant with built-in accountability measures. As part of the grant, Swanson created a counselor academy serving 22 school districts in Iowa, and it became back-to-school time for school counselors. Through this academy, Iowa school counselors learned to align their programs with the ASCA National Model®. Activities included examining data profiles, such as state test proficiency scores, behavior referrals and student/teacher surveys and conducting training and nontraining interventions.

The counselor academy provided the opportunity for counselors to work on the project during the summer. “It gave counselors actual work time to sit down and plan things out,” Swanson said. “The coaching was helpful as well.”

Now back in the workplace, school counselors are able to apply what they’ve learned about accountability. “The academy’s focus was on elementary schools, but we crashed the party,” said Suzanne Schrader, a counselor at Clinton High School in Iowa. “The training allowed us to be more proactive instead of reactive to things that are happening at the school.” Using pre- and post-test data, Schrader discovered they were giving ninth-graders too much information in their initial counseling curriculum. “In the second trimester, we made it more developmentally appropriate, and the data improved,” Schrader said.

For Candy Reed, an elementary school counselor in Davenport, Iowa, the counselor academy brought an emotional energy to her program. “It has really given us a direction and focus.”

Swanson is enthusiastic about the progress school counselors have made. “This project has changed how they look at their jobs,” she said. “Prior to implementing accountability measures, they could never stand back and look objectively at their practice.”

**ADVOCATING FOR A PROFESSION**  
Although strong foundation, delivery and management components are critical to any comprehensive school counseling program, their benefits are only fully realized with the ability to measure and demonstrate the program’s effectiveness. An accountability system provides this final piece of the ASCA National Model. Data collection helps counselors answer the question: How are students different as a result of the school counseling program?

“Accountability really is a shift in the way we think about what we’re doing and the results of what we do,” said Trish Hatch, professor at San Diego State University and co-author of “The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs.”

Accountability begins to address issues plaguing the school counseling profession, such as operational inefficiencies and the lack of perceived legitimacy. Data showing improvement equals leverage for the school counselor to justify continued or additional resources. “If we’re not accountable, we’re at risk in our jobs,” Swanson said.

For counselors in St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota, results translate to cash. Dan Labore, the area’s counseling project coordinator, has made program funding contingent on accountability. “Schools have to report results at least once per year, as well as complete an audit and improvement plan,” Labore said. “Counselors don’t get any funds until they’ve completed their homework.”

By sharing results, school counselors can begin to advocate for their profession and educate the community about the value of school counseling.

As the only counselor at Davis Bilingual Elementary Magnet School in Tucson, Ariz., Teresa Toro knows it’s up to her. ”I’m constantly reminding my principal, faculty and staff the value of what I do,” Toro said. “Showing them the numbers is what has the most impact on them.” In addition to annual one-page presentations given to faculty and staff, Toro presents quarterly reports to the principal, to educate him about her job and the impact is has on the school.

Advocacy in the classroom helps counselors answer an all-too-common question from teachers: Why should I give you core class time? “We may not be teaching core subjects, but it’s an integral ancillary program,” said Shannon Foxley, counselor at Stoller Middle School in Beaverton, Ore. “If students feel they can’t get through class, how are you going to be able to teach them anything?”

Hatch recognizes the struggle to balance classroom work with counseling curriculum and stresses the importance of proving that counseling time is well-spent. “Show teachers you’re contributing in a positive, effective way,” Hatch said. “If you’re working with students but can’t demonstrate it’s working, then don’t take them out of the classroom instruction.”

Whether advocacy is with administration, community or teachers, accountability provides the means for school counselors to can prove they’re making a difference in students’ lives.  
   
**System Components**  
The accountability system is made up of three components: results reports showing the impact of the counseling program over time; school counselor performance standards providing consistent, relevant evaluation criteria; and the program audit, which promotes ongoing program improvement.

**Results reports:** Results reports help school counselors ensure their programs are carried out, analyze their programs for effectiveness and improve their programs going forward. Using results reports, school counselors can review data trends over time in all domain areas: academic, career and personal/social. “We need to make sure we’re covering knowledge, skills and attitudes,” Schrader said. “Are students actually going to put what they’ve learned to use?”

In her sixth year of implementing accountability programs, Toro’s results reports include quarterly templates that become progress reports over time. In one instance, she looked at discipline referrals per year by grade level. The results showed the kindergarten group had the highest discipline referrals. By implementing guidance curriculum, including home visits with parents, and tracking students over time, she was able to prove the effectiveness of her interventions. The students she started with now have the lowest referrals.

For Labore, results reports help track his program’s adherence to grant guidelines. Working with the Center for Applied Research, an external evaluator, St. Paul schools report back to the foundation that funded the overall program about how each school is doing relative to grant goals. The foundation meets with each school a couple of times a year to collect data and disseminate the results to teachers, students and parents.

**School counselor performance standards:** While results reports provide evidence of a program’s effectiveness, performance standards provide evaluation criteria for school counselors. School counselor performance standards allow administrators to evaluate personnel delivering the school counseling program in the areas of program implementation, program evaluation and professionalism. They also help school counselors structure their own professional development.

Before the ASCA National Model was released with sample school counselor performance standards, many school counselors were evaluated using instruments designed for teachers or resource professionals.

That was the case for Oregon’s Foxley, whose district is now transitioning from ad-hoc counselor performance evaluations, such as using teaching or psychology evaluation forms, to school counselor performance standards aligned with the ASCA National Model and the state framework. “Everyone will be held to the same standards,” Foxley said. The new standards will go into effect this fall.

“I’m excited about implementing the performance standards,” she said. “It creates accountability and changes how people perceive counseling.”

**Program audit:** The third component of the accountability system, the program audit, allows school counselors to focus on the overall effectiveness and continued improvement of their comprehensive school counseling programs. It helps school counselors analyze each program component and identify areas for enhancement to improve future results for students.

For Foxley, a high-level district audit was a way to “take a quick temperature” of existing programs. The audit showed the school counselors were really good at responsive services. “But, that’s what we’ve always done, so is that really a good thing?” Foxley asked. “Accountability pushes us to do more. We’re trying to work smarter.” With action plans now in place for every school, Foxley anticipates positive changes. “I really think we’re on our way.”

Toro, like all counselors who report to Judy Bowers, school counseling director for Tucson Unified School District, has to submit quarterly audits covering all four areas of the delivery system. “It’s looking at the numbers and percentages of how we spend our time, how that affects our schools and how that supports the school’s goals,” Toro said. Using daily data entry logs, Toro tracks activities as they relate to individual planning, systems support, curriculum planning and responsive services. “When it comes time to submit the quarterly audit, I just plug in the numbers and percentages.”

**Overcoming Barriers**   
More than any other component of the ASCA National Model, the accountability system presents challenges to counselors hesitant about implementing new programs. Many counselors want to be accountable but aren’t sure how. “Measuring behavior and achievement is a new skill,” Hatch said. Often, counselors haven’t been trained in data collection and don’t know where to start.

To keep initial accountability efforts manageable, Hatch suggests keeping it simple. “I like counselors to begin by selecting just one thing to measure, and then measuring it well.” She advises school counselors to get comfortable measuring the impact of something they’re already doing.

As Schrader directs school counselors in her training academy, “Pick one thing you think makes the most difference, and measure that.” Once the area has been identified, school counselors should look to see if students have gained the knowledge, attitudes and skills to actually begin to make behavior change.

For Reed, the choice was clear: use her district’s goal to increase attendance as her starting point. Her data collection focused on how attendance ties into achievement. Currently in the middle of data collection, Reed hopes to show that improving attendance improves achievement scores. “Right now, we’re deciding which stats to put together. It’s bringing a lot of good discussion about what the data mean.”

Attendance was also the focus for Toro, whose program shows students how their attendance affects their performance in school. This year, Toro launched a perfect attendance program, complete with gift certificates from local businesses as prizes. For the first time in more than 10 years, her school has the best attendance. “This year, we have 12 students who have not missed school. That is phenomenal.”

**Finding Support**   
Counselors who have implemented accountability programs in their schools agree that having a support network is an absolute necessity. “There’s no way it would work without the buy-in from the principal, teachers, parents and community,” Toro said.

According to Hatch, the school counselors doing the best job are those who have support from the top down – not only philosophically but also organizationally. School counselors are much more effective with a team, central office support and administrative support. “If colleagues, superintendents and principals aren’t interested, counselors can feel frustrated and disconnected,” Hatch said.

“We’re lucky; we have a supportive principal and supportive district. I couldn’t do it on my own,” Schrader said.

Support also comes in the form of training and knowledge-sharing with colleagues already implementing accountability programs. Because of the counselor academy in Iowa, for example, Reed was able to explore ideas and address issues related to her program. “People hear what others have done, and they think, ‘If it has credibility somewhere else, maybe it would work for me.’”

Hatch recommends school counselors in the field start talking about what they’ve done and learned to inspire others. “Sharing the results of what they’re learning can take away others’ fear of getting started,” she said.

To kick off his restructuring project with St. Paul Public Schools, Labore took nine counselors to Tucson, where they spent a week with Bowers and visited three high school already implementing comprehensive school counseling programs. “We bonded as a group and learned all about the ASCA National Model,” Labore said.

As Labore discovered, ensuring school counselors are comfortable with the ASCA National Model is critical to successful implementation of any of its components, especially accountability. This comfort level is easier for some to achieve than others. As more and more colleges are adding the ASCA National Model to their curriculum, recent school counseling graduates are better versed in implementing it than those out in the field.

Toro, who studied with Bowers during her master’s program, was “drenched with the ASCA National Model. When I got out of school, I knew exactly my role, my job and the importance of accountability.”

Foxley, Oregon’s counselor of the year, had a different experience. “Newer counselors are raised in the ASCA National Model. This isn’t what I was trained to do.” She credits the varied backgrounds of experienced and new counselors as providing the right mix for applying the ASCA National Model to their program.

**Conquering Fears**   
In theory, at least, school counselors understand the importance of accountability. “As a former chemistry teacher, it just made sense to me that you’d test to see if you’re making a difference,” Schrader said. In practice, however, fear of numbers remains an obstacle to overcome. Reed sums up the hesitancy of so many counselors when it comes to data-driven accountability programs: “We’re not mathematicians. Getting to that point has been a struggle for some of us.”

“We need to take the ‘four-letter word’ feeling out of data and focus instead on why it’s important,” Hatch said. After six years of successfully implementing accountability programs, Toro agrees. “I was not into data. But now that I understand the importance of accountability, it’s becoming second nature to me.”

Although spreadsheet software can facilitate data gathering and analysis, computer literacy issues also pose difficulties for many counselors. “Younger counselors are often more computer literate,” Reed said. “Newer folks coming in have been a big help.”

While data or technology skills could easily be a divisive factor among counselors, Reed, of Davenport, Iowa, suggests that playing to each other’s strengths is the way to go. “I’m the keeper of the spreadsheets because I’m comfortable with the numbers.” Other counselors in her group, who meet monthly to discuss data, have taken on project tasks that match their interests and abilities.

Regardless of data’s complexity, school counselors will be well-served by putting accountability practices to use. “Don’t be afraid of the forms and templates,” advises Reed, who has found the documents in the ASCA National Model workbook an extremely useful tool for organizing her data.

Ultimately, Hatch says, it’s the school counselor’s responsibility to look at the counseling activity, design appropriate measurements, share the results with faculty and improve the program. Put simply, “Do more of what works and less of what doesn’t.”

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